



NEWS RELEASE



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November 17, 2008

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TEMPORARY FIRE RESTORATION CLOSURES

Habitat restoration activities on the Hanford Reach National Monument (Monument) will require the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to temporarily close the main access road to the Wahluke Ponds beginning on or about November 19, 2008, and potentially extending through early December. Temporary access restrictions will also be in place in active work areas. The temporary closure and access restrictions are to allow the FWS to aerially apply native seed to lands damaged by wildfires in 2007. Visitors should contact the FWS at (509) 546-8300, or check information boards at the Wahluke and Ringold access gates, to see which work areas are active on any given day.

The Wahluke Ponds themselves will remain open; only the Wahluke Ponds access road will be temporarily closed. Access to active work areas will be temporarily restricted for the safety of the visiting public and for that of the crews conducting the restoration operations. The White Bluffs Boat Launch access road will remain open; however, travelers should expect delays during periods of aerial operations.

The temporary closure and access restrictions are needed to continue restoration efforts of native shrubs and grasses on over 77,000 acres burned in wildfires during the summer of 2007. Restoration work has been ongoing since November 2007, with over 700,000 native upland and riparian shrubs planted and over 42,500 acres treated for invasive weeds so far. This fall work will focus on aerial application of native seed, including native grass, shrub and wildflower species, and on continued planting of native shrubs and riparian plants. The seed mixes, shrubs and riparian plants will help to stabilize soils and prevent erosion, to repair damage to the native ecosystem, and to compete with a variety of non-native, invasive species.

The FWS will try to keep the areas open on weekends during the project; however, weather conditions may require crews to work on weekends to complete the work. The closure and access restriction areas will include lands from Parking Lot 7 in the Ringold area north to Highway 24. While the closure may last up to 20 days, the FWS is making every effort to finish the work sooner, weather permitting.

It is important that visitors heed closure signs for their own safety and for the safety of the crews conducting the restoration operations. Visitors may call the FWS's Mid-Columbia River National Wildlife Refuge Complex headquarters at (509) 546-8300 for up-to-date information on closures during this rehabilitation effort, including potential weekend closures.

On July 13, 2007, three lightning-caused wildfires quickly grew together into the Overlook Fire. Before it was contained, the Overlook Fire spread through 21,071 acres of shrub-steppe and riparian habitats, damaging the ecology and landscape by removing native shrubs and grasses from areas open to the public on the Wahluke Slope.

Immediately after the fires, Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER, pronounced “bear”) Plans were developed to address emergency rehabilitation needs. These BAER Plans, developed by FWS experts in consultation with Native American tribes and local technical experts, include treating for invasive weeds using multiple methods, seeding native plant species, and hand-planting native shrubs and riparian plants.

While the ecological structure and function of the burned areas cannot be restored in a short period of time, these efforts jumpstart the recovery of ecological processes and habitat quality. Shrub-steppe is one of the slowest habitats to recover naturally and, without intervention, could take decades or longer to begin to recover. Quickly halting the establishment and spread of invasive plants and promoting native species establishment will not only benefit native plants and animals, but will help prevent the area from being even more damaged by any future fires.

“The Monument provides habitat for plant and animal communities that are in serious decline throughout the West, and it is important that we reestablish a functioning ecosystem as quickly as possible in support of these unique resources,” stated Lee Albright, Deputy Project Leader for the Mid-Columbia River National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The FWS manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 542 national wildlife refuges—including two national monuments—thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices, and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid Program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.